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SUBJECT: INTERIOR RESIDENTS EXPRESS VIEWS ON U.S. FINANCIAL CRISIS, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND OMANI POLICIES

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo per 1.4 (B and D).

¶1. (C) Summary: In his 'Eid al Fitri calls on senior sheikhs and majlis members in Oman's interior Sharqia governorate, the Ambassador heard diverse and sometimes surprising views about the U.S. and on Omani government policies. Omanis expressed considerable interest in the ongoing financial crisis in the U.S., holding the U.S. responsible for the crisis but also anticipating eventual action to stave off a more severe global crisis. Most seemed to be following the U.S. presidential election, many offering their views on their preferred candidate but all expressing amazement at the apparent success of "the Black American," seeing his success as proof of America's foundation values of equality, fairness and reward for hard work. While nothing but praise was heard for Sultan Qaboos -) "the strongest Omani leader since Sa'id the Great" (of the early nineteenth century))- one senior sheikh suggested that the government's claimed policy of equality and fair treatment in economic development and education was simply "propaganda."
End Summary.

¶2. (C) Over a two and half-day period of the Muslim 'Eid al Fitri holiday, the Ambassador called on tribal sheikhs and "tamima" (paramount) sheikhs and Majlis al Doula and Majlis al Shura members in 'Ibra, Mudharib, Badiya, Al Qabil, Al Kamil, Ja'alan Bani bu Hassan and Ja'alan Bani bu Ali, all located in Oman's Sharqia Governorate extending just south of Muscat to Masirah Island. The area is home to some of Oman's largest and most influential tribes, including the Al Hartiy (both awlad (sons of) 'Issa and awlad Humaid), Al Maskeri, Al Hijri, Al Hashmi, Al Masrouri, Al Sunaidi, and Al Mu'tani. Several of these tribes were among the last to pledge loyalty to the Sultan when he came to power in 1970 and had resisted for many years many of his reforms. The sheikhs hosted the Ambassador for traditional holiday meals of platters of roasted goat on rice among groups of 20-80 individuals seated on the floor. Omani sheikhs traditionally welcome and preside over these gatherings, which occur repeatedly throughout the first two days of 'eid holidays. Government officials, even ministers, typically take a back seat at such gatherings unless they also hold a tribal rank, which in Oman occurs very rarely. Lively discussions can often take place but customarily only before or after the meal. Other sessions the Ambassador attended included only family members but still numbered as many as 20. Women are not included in these traditionally all-male, holiday majlises but males of all ages, from as young as four or five, are welcomed.

U.S. Economic Crisis: How Could It Happen?

¶3. (C) While lacking an in-depth understanding of the current U.S. financial crisis, most were aware of the impact the crisis was having on the U.S. and global equity and credit markets. They expressed dismay that such a "scandal" could have occurred in the most advanced country in the world

and proffered predictable theories about corruption on Wall Street as well as reckless oversight by the USG of the financial institutions. They wondered how as sophisticated a financial system as America's could have allowed such a crisis in the first place and then been so slow to react once the full dimension was apparent.

¶4. (C) Younger, better educated Omanis displayed greater understanding of the crisis and were more likely to view USG actions or inaction more critically. Many of these placed blame for the crisis at the foot of the U.S., arguing, "You made this mess and you have to clean it up." The visit came just after the House voted against the financial rescue package, and all expressed shock at the apparent refusal of the USG to "shoulder your responsibility." All seemed to agree that inaction in the U.S. would lead to a global crisis "affecting even Oman." Several expressed sympathy for the view that "responsible Americans" should not have to pay for irresponsibility and recklessness on Wall Street and grave mistakes of unscrupulous bankers and borrowers. However, a surprising number voiced confidence in Americans and our ability to find a way out of the problem and avoid a more serious global crisis.

Who Will Be the Next U.S. President?

¶5. (C) Second to the unfolding financial crisis was the keen interest in the U.S. presidential election. While some wondered whether a new president might usher in a new U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, most seemed resigned to "minor tweaks" or changes in style to our current policy in the region. Unlike discussions one year ago, few Omanis seemed concerned about our Iraq policy, acknowledging things

"seemed to be improving," but many more communicated alarm about U.S. policy toward Iran. One elder tamima sheikh wondered if we were "again favoring the Persians over the Arabs" in an effort to offset the surging power of each in order to maintain our own influence in the region. Many stated their hope that the next president would finally "seriously consider" and settle the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. However, several voiced their doubts on this subject.

¶6. (C) All seemed to have a view on which of the two principal candidates would be better for the Middle East. All seemed to wonder whether an African American really stood a chance of winning. Younger Omanis with computer savvy shared their observations on the latest polls reported on the internet suggesting the Democratic candidate had the edge, which generated spirited discussion. When one Omani suggested that Senator Obama's chances would be harmed due to his alleged connection to Islam, an elder sheikh piped up, "It doesn't matter because Americans don't care about their president's religion any more." One U.S.-educated Omani, in a session in Ja'alan Bani bu Hassan, impressively argued that regardless of who won, the election and Senator Obama's candidacy were evidence that racism had been overcome in the U.S. and that America was living up to its values of equality, fairness and reward for hard work. An older sheikh seated at the head of the group, nodded his approval, asserting "That kind of thing can probably only happen in America."

A Rare Dissenter on Omani Progress

¶7. (C) Praise for the Sultan and his "wise policies" was almost universal and appeared genuine. Many individuals of lesser stature came up to the Ambassador to privately communicate their affection for the Sultan and praise for his successful leadership of the country and concern for all Omanis. However, one tamima sheikh expressed a contrary view. Offering an impressive and detailed knowledge of both Omani history and tribal politics, he argued that the current central government was in the ascendancy largely because of the acknowledged abilities of one man. That had happened only one other time in Omani history: in the first half of the nineteenth century under the rule of Sultan Sa'id bin

Sultan 'The Great'. Otherwise, Oman had been a nation largely governed by dominant tribes.

¶18. (C) Despite the many accomplishments of Qaboos, said the senior sheikh, it was not certain that Oman would remain a nation under a strong central government. He pointed out some of the government's "unfair" practices in areas of education and development, alleging that not all regions were treated equally or fairly. This contradicted the government's propaganda touting an image of fairness and determination to set aside tribal biases, he concluded, and should be recognized by outsiders.

Comment

¶19. (C) The tribes of the Sharqia region were the last to submit to Qaboos' rule; and the tribes of Ja'alan Bani bu Hassan, which are Ibadhi, and of Ja'alan Bani bu Ali, which are Sunni, resisted Qaboos' reforms well into the late 1970s.

The powerful Al Harthy sheikhs were the last to recognize Qaboos, and their patriarch, the tamima sheikh, was jailed in 1970 and remained under house arrest well into the mid-seventies. A resistant strain remains among several of the tribes of the region and is an area of considerable attention of the government in its tribal management program.

¶110. (C) The visit provided interesting and sometimes reassuring or illuminating insights about Omani attitudes toward the U.S., their understanding of international issues, and views of their own government. Two issues surprisingly absent from the Omani interactions with the Ambassador were Iraq (despite the Ambassador's prompting) and the recent tension in U.S.-Oman relations over the Department's trafficking-in-persons report. Sheikhs in particular preferred concentrating on the historically strong relationship between us. That generally still favorable assessment seemed to carry over into the Omanis' faith in Americans and in the U.S. system eventually to deal with the financial crisis. The comment about an African American becoming president was probably more intended as criticism of tribalism in Oman, where individual Omanis are first identified and often judged by their tribal affiliation, than as praise of the U.S.

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